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## Consumer Identity and Religiosity of Social Networks' Users

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*In the consumer society people take not only things, but also signs of things, brands, images and ideas. Consumer identity means that a person defines his/her belonging to a social group through consumption. This article examines religion as a means of consumer identity formation in the post-industrial society (the case of social networks' users). The researchers have found that users of social networks perceive religion as consumer goods when they have no faith experience and their knowledge of religion is fragmentary and based on clichés and stereotypes. In this case discussion of the religious content becomes the way to express their uniqueness and to win recognition from other users.*

*Keywords: religion, religious faith, identity, consumer identity, consumer society, mass media, cyber space, social network.*

In the era of the informational society the process of the world economy globalization and the development of the Internet technology, society and identity are changing rapidly. Along with the traditional forms of identity, virtual, corporate, and consumer identities are being formed. Consumer identity is based on the fact that a self-image of a person is influenced by material things which one can afford. Therefore, a person constructing one's identity consumes not material things, but signs and images.

In the consumer society the attitude towards religion and various religious practices can also be a part of consumer identity. Ways of religion perception tend to simplify, the knowledge of the religious content being superficial and observance of certain religious rites and rules becomes the

means of expression of its own uniqueness; religion is turning into a commodity, as well as other signs and ideas.

In this article we look at how religion can influence the development of consumer identity in social networks. Out of many social practices we have chosen Internet social networks for the following reasons. Firstly, when analyzing social networks we have access to a larger number of available empirical data and thus are able to observe how religion is used in the process of identity construction in the post-industrial society. Basing on the analysis of social networks, we can identify forms and ways in which religion becomes a part of consumer identity, the negative effects of this process. Secondly, the Internet has a significant impact on our daily lives;

processes that have spontaneously appeared in social networks are able to influence the off-line reality.

The modern industrial society is a society of consumption, in which the key is not only the production of goods and services, but also the production of needs. Jean Baudrillard notes that consumption not only satisfies material needs of a person, but to a greater extent is necessary in order to indicate the social status of a person belonging to a particular class. What matters is not the things themselves, but their signs: «the desire for a status and the high standard of living is based on the signs, that is not on the things or the goods in themselves, but the differences» (Jean Baudrillard, 2006). A person consumes brands, i.e. symbols and images by means of which he/she aspires to express his/her difference from the others, his/her identity. How and what a person consumes are the markers of his/her status in the society.

In this way consumption develops from simple use of consumer goods into the means of constructing social identity, provides sociocultural integration of an individual into the society. V.I. Ilyin notes that “the economy of the consumer society leans on a new type of personality. Its key feature is longing for consumption as a way of identity designing. Owing to this fact the full satisfaction of even basic needs becomes impossible, because identity demands daily reproduction” (Ilyin, 2005). Unlike traditional identities which are defined by sexual, religious, national and professional belonging, consumer identity is substantially changeable and mobile.

The concept of consumer identity is used in two ways. First, consumer identity is understood as identity, uniqueness, identity of a product which is broadcast through verbal and visual communications of a consumer brand. Secondly, consumer identity is the possibility for a person to define himself/herself through consumption

of different goods, services, ideas and images. In this case a person constructs his/her identity (belonging to a social class, commitment to certain ideas etc.) by consuming not goods, but signs, brands, images and ideas.

In the 60s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the American sociology a metaphor of the free market of religion was popular: “Religious institutions, in turn, act much like other types of “firms”. The most successful churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples fashion their styles of worship, theological messages, and social benefits to meet the exacting and mutable demands of prospective adherents” (Benek C., 2010). Various religious faiths rival offering different goods and services. Consumer identity is constructed on the base of consumption of signs, brands and images; in our opinion, in the consumer society the relation to religion, art, a political position can be a part of consumer identity as well. Thus, in the post-industrial society people consume not only things, goods and their signs, but also religious ideas, political theories etc. Religion influences the formation of consumer identity in the case when religiousness has an external ceremonial character, and people’s religious preferences are formed under the influence of mass media and popular literature.

In order to distinguish between the attitude to religion as a form of consumption and other forms of religiosity, we applied the concepts of faith and belief proposed by D.V. Pivovarov<sup>1</sup>. Every faith has its own subject. The subject of “faith is being as solid integrity” (D.V. Pivovarov, 2004), and its content is the relationship with the Absolute, it is based on individual religious experience. Faith is a special kind of spiritual knowledge that is based on direct knowledge of the Absolute. Faith is completely inexpressible in language, because there are limits to conceptualization of religious experience. Belief does not involve direct spiritual experience, it is based on the trust in the religious

experience of another person. Belief can be transferred by means of language, it is connected with the transmission of religious experience (e.g. theology, or prove of the existence of God.) Having no religious experience, belief is more focused on observing the ritual side of religion, the formal aspect of worship is more important than its content.

Religion becomes a part of consumer identity in the case when a person has no faith experience, he/she is not religious or his/her religiousness is based on belief. Further we consider how the relation to religion can influence the consumer identity construction of social networks users.

Originally the concept "social network" represents a set of individuals connected with each other directly or through the third persons, and not surely acquaintances with each other. The concept "social network" was created in 1960s – 70s in the works by M. Granovetter, K.Fischer and E.Bott. Social networks influence the construction of consumer identity, because they give their users an opportunity to choose between various ideas and systems of values to show their uniqueness. Social network unites people in groups on the basis of knowledge and values, thus becoming a unique tool for consumer identity development.

Social networks open to its users the space for consumer identity construction by providing them with a significant amount of information, giving them a right of choice and freedom of evaluation. The users with belief-based religiousness perceive religion as a commodity; in this case religion influences their consumer identity, and their attitude to religion becomes a part of consumer identity. Further, we consider different cases when some users of social networks understand religion as a means of consumer identity construction.

The rate of information transfer in social networks is very high. According to Granovetter's

research, weak, but not strong ties influence the rate in social networks (Granovetter, 1973). Strong ties are based on a strong personal contact (friendship, relationship), weak ties are a system of mediated acquaintances where social interaction has an intermediary character. The high rate of information transfer assumes that information is broadcast in a condensed form, the content of the transferred message becomes simpler, and information has a fragmented character. First of all, that is why the religious knowledge of some users of social networks is generally perfunctory and incomplete. For example, the information on a religious holiday by a card or a short news text can't explain the religious value of this holiday, describes only its outer ceremonial side. Incomplete knowledge of religion based on clichés and stereotypes, becomes the base of a consumer's attitude toward religion among some users of a social network; for them religion is not a way to find an answer to existential questions, but a system of ideas and images which is used to construct consumer identity.

Secondly, the representation of religious news in social networks has a perfunctory and subjective character. News as well as any other information extends very quickly and widespread; that is why a large number of users have an opportunity to create and express their relation to the occurred religious event, but usually their position is not independent and reasonable. When a user of a social network reads religious news, his/her relation to an event is formed quickly enough, strongly depends on a way how information is given, emotionally painted. A person actually does not have enough time and specific knowledge to create his/her own critical attitude to the situation. When some users of social networks put comments on religious news, they do it in order to show their uniqueness, not realizing that their assessment is based on clichés and stereotypes. That is why reading and

discussion of religious news has become a way to express their consumer identity to some users of social networks.

Social networks overcome the restrictions imposed by physical space. Users of social networks have a possibility to construct virtual identity, "virtual personality is more unchained, more expressive", "the desire to design virtual persons can appear when the reality does not provide a possibility for realization of various aspects of "myself" (Shishkova A., 2010). Therefore, in cyber space people often use additional roles which they don't actually play to design their identity. People compelled to live and work in other country aspire to keep national identity through religion. Their account in a social network shows in various ways their confession: status, photos, messages about religious holidays, discussion of religious news etc. But these people are not religious in everyday life, their virtual identity considerably differs from the social one. In our opinion, in this case religion is used as a sign or as a brand by means of which a person expresses his/her uniqueness and national identity; the relation to religion of these users, demonstration of the confession is an element of not only consumer national identity, because their attitude toward religion does not assume existential involvement into religion, faith. Designing consumer identity of these users in cyber space helps them to keep national identity.

According to the research by K. Young, one of the strategies to create virtual identity is "to develop a universal character "in terms of the virtual interaction rules, having role-based recognition in any online communities" (K. Young, 1997). For some users it is important that their virtual identity has gained recognition among other users of social networks; for this purpose various religious contents, assessment of religious phenomena, discussion of religious news etc. can be used. In this case the discussion

connected with religious life is a way to gain recognition of other users of social networks, religion is taken here as a means of constructing consumer identity.

Using religion as a means of constructing consumer identity leads to negative consequences. In social networks there is practically no stratification (or it is very weak). Horizontal network communities unlike vertical hierarchical ones are based on self-government, the level of self-organizing in them is very high. In horizontal network communities the information extends as avalanche, within a short period of time a huge number of users can discuss a religious event and make reposts. For some time different trends of assessment of the situation are formed. Domination of a trend depends on the speed and a number of users who have supported it. That is why the way of perception of this or that religious event in a social network is defined by those users for whom the relation to religion is an element of their consumer identity. It is dangerous because the attitude to a religious event is formed not by those users who have specific knowledge and are capable to state a rational assessment of the events, but by the users whose position is based on clichés and stamps. In this way the discussion of religious news and the religious content in social networks often has a unilateral and superficial character.

The religion becomes an instrument for constructing consumer identity of users when the attitude to religion does not assume faith, and religion is used only as a means of expression of the user's uniqueness. In this case religion is used as a sign or as a brand to express belonging to a certain culture or a social group. We have considered the cases when discussion of religious news and the religious content becomes an instrument for designing consumer identity; in these cases users are not deeply religious people, their relation to religion is based on clichés and

stereotypes, they use religion to express the uniqueness, to receive popularity among other users.

It would be incorrect to argue that similar relation to religion prevails among users of social networks. On the contrary, there is a large number of users who use social networks as on-line continuation of life of their off-line religious community: they discuss theological, political and social problems on-line, solve the ecclesiastical benefice's problems on-line etc. For example, the Arab spring is connected with big

activity of Muslims in social networks. I.Sayetov uses the term "cybermuslim" to show how the communality of Islam expresses itself in cyber space, and social networks in particular. He writes that Internet and social networks become "a place for receiving new knowledge and information, some kind of "media mosques", groups in social networks and forums – 'hyper mahalle', and their participants – 'cybermuslims'". (Sayetov I., 2012). Thus, social networks are space where different forms of religiousness and different ways of relation to religion coexist.

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: in Russian there is one word ("vera") that unites two notions: "faith" and "belief". D.V. Pivovarov, a famous Russian philosopher and a specialist in culture and religion studies, suggested that the English tradition of using the words "faith" and "belief" should be applied to distinguish the difference in the meaning of the word "vera" in Russian (i.e. faith-vera and belief-vera).

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## **Потребительская идентичность и религиозность пользователей социальных сетей**

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*В обществе потребления человек потребляет не только вещи, но и знаки вещей, бренды, образы, идеи. Потребительская идентичность связана с тем, что человек определяет свою принадлежность к социальной группе через потребление. В этой статье мы рассматриваем на примере пользователей социальных сетей, каким образом религия может быть средством конструирования потребительской идентичности в постиндустриальном обществе. Исследование показало, что религия воспринимается пользователями социальных сетей как предмет потребления, когда у них нет опыта faith-веры, знание о религии фрагментарно, основано на клише и стереотипах. В этом случае обсуждение религиозного контента становится способом выразить свою уникальность и заслужить признание других пользователей.*

*Ключевые слова: религия, религиозная вера, идентичность, потребительская идентичность, общество потребления, средства массовой коммуникации, интернет-пространство, социальные сети.*

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